



# WYOMING 2015 STATEWIDE HUNTING SEASON FORECAST

## PRONGHORN (antelope)

### JACKSON REGION

In the Jackson Region, northern portions of the Sublette pronghorn herd include Hunt Areas 85 and 86. Although hunter success is good, Hunt Area 85 (Gros Ventre) offers very limited hunting opportunities. There will only be 20 licenses offered for the season. Hunt Area 86 (Hoback) has seen an increase in pronghorn during the past several years. However, hunter access is limited and the majority of the hunting opportunities are located on private lands in the Boundurant area.

### CODY REGION

Pronghorn hunting in the southern Big Horn Basin will likely be similar to 2014. Although pronghorn numbers are still below target levels in both the Copper Mountain herd (Hunt Areas 76, 114, 115) and the 15-Mile herd (Hunt Areas 77, 83, 110), we did see some improvements in fawn production in 2014 and 2015, which should translate to better hunting in the future. Hunting seasons will remain fairly conservative in most areas to help these herds grow. Damage issues on private crop lands have mostly subsided in recent years, therefore the 2015 hunting season will have fewer doe/fawn licenses in about all hunt areas. Hunters who did draw a license shouldn't have a problem finding a reasonable buck to harvest.

The 2014/15 winter began with several severe cold periods, but moderated by mid-January, but may still have resulted in normal over-winter mortality. Hunters should expect conservative season seasons for the next several years to allow these herds to increase. Hunt Areas 78, 80, 81, and 82 should have similar seasons as in 2014, with about the same opportunity, and for hunters with a license, hunting should be good.

### SHERIDAN REGION

Northeast Wyoming has abundant herds of antelope. Fawn production in 2014 was the highest in many years and over-winter survival was good. Antelope populations should grow as weather and forage production in 2015 has been favorable for another above average year of fawn production. The favorable conditions have also been good for horn growth. Hunting seasons have been designed to give hunters plenty of opportunity. The outlook for antelope hunting in most of the Sheridan Region is very good. However, in those hunt areas north of Gillette and Moorcroft, especially Hunt Area 18, antelope populations are still lower than a few years ago, so license numbers have been set accordingly. In the Sheridan Region antelope hunt areas, hunters are allowed to purchase a second any antelope license and up to four doe/fawn licenses. However, potential hunters need to be aware that most antelope hunting is found on private land and they should make arrangements for a place to hunt prior to buying licenses. Hunters willing to wait until after the opening day and first weekend of the season may find it easier to get access to private lands. It is possible to find some antelope on the parcels of public lands scattered around northeast Wyoming, but hunters can expect to find other hunters also using those lands. Because of crop damage issues, Hunt Areas 22 and 102 near Buffalo will once again have early rifle doe/fawn seasons beginning September 1 in portions of the hunt areas.

## **GREEN RIVER REGION**

Hunters will again notice an improvement in pronghorn hunting when compared to last year, both in number of pronghorn and horn growth. Mild winter weather and ample moisture have yielded good horn growth this year. Conditions were favorable throughout the Green River Region for both improved animal body condition and fawn production this year, which will improve hunting for this year and following years. As always, hunters will find variable pronghorn hunting opportunities in the Green River Region depending on population status but, in general, the outlook is improving. Many pronghorn populations in the region were significantly affected by the winter of 2010-11 and drought caused lower fawn production/survival during the summers of 2012 and 2013. However, very mild winters in 2013-14 and 2014-15 coupled with higher than average moisture, have resulted in conditions that rarely get better, for all local wildlife species. In general, license numbers and season lengths are similar to 2014 across the region (Hunt Areas 53, 57, 58, 59, 92, 93, 94, 96, 98, 99, 100, and 112), and hunters can expect additional opportunities in the future if conditions persist. Hunters in Hunt Area 94 are reminded to obtain a permission slip from Western Wyoming Range Limited Partnership before accessing private lands.

As is typical for this part of the state during wetter periods, hunters are reminded to stay on established roads and to be prepared for challenging driving conditions, particularly in clay soil types.

## **LARAMIE REGION**

The Laramie Region received good fall precipitation this past year, and good spring and early summer precipitation this year. Habitat is in good condition across the region given this above-average spring and early summer moisture. Based on preliminary pronghorn classification data, fawn ratios have improved the past two years. Pronghorn should be entering the fall in very good body condition and, thus, should have good overwinter survival. Pronghorn hunters should expect hunting to be similar to 2014 based on decreased pronghorn densities across the region. However, given the higher quality habitat, pronghorn hunters should expect to see better horn growth on bucks and an increase in yearlings and fawns in the field this year based on two good fawn production years. Many of the region's pronghorn herd units are below their population objectives as a result of the 2010-11 severe winter, EHD outbreaks, and 2012 drought. Pronghorn licenses were reduced across the Laramie region for the 2014 seasons due to the decrease in pronghorn populations, and further reduced in some areas for the 2015 season. Licenses will remain low until population recovery is observed.

Much of the land in southeastern Wyoming is privately-owned, which limits access in some hunt areas. Good buck ratios and horn growth will provide a good hunting experience for hunters who can find a place to hunt. Hunters should refer to Bureau of Land Management (BLM), U.S Forest Service (USFS), or their GPS maps to determine land ownership. Access for pronghorn hunting on private land in the region continues to improve, but can still be problematic. Private Lands Public Wildlife (PLPW) Hunter Management Areas and numerous Walk-In Areas provide access for pronghorn hunters on both private and public lands throughout the region.

New in 2015, Hunt Areas 41 and 42 were combined into Hunt Area 42. Pronghorn hunters are encouraged to review their 2015 pronghorn regulations prior to going afield.

## **LANDER REGION**

With increased fawn production and survival in 2014, pronghorn populations in the Lander Region have increased, but are still below management objectives throughout most of the area. To date, pronghorn classifications are showing increased fawn production again in 2015 and as expected increased yearling bucks. However, overall numbers of pronghorn are still down due to the extreme drought conditions experienced in 2012 and 2013. Increases in precipitation and forage production again this year have contributed to good spring/summer habitat conditions. Buck quality appears to be good to outstanding in many areas as many quality mature bucks have been observed. Hunters should expect good harvest success, but with fewer animals around it may take a little more effort than usual.

## **CASPER REGION**

This fall, pronghorn hunting in the Casper Region will be improved from the past few years, and hunters should expect to see more antelope. Thanks to excellent precipitation and mild winter weather over the past two years, pronghorn fawn production and over winter survival has been very good, and herds are now growing after being at low levels over the past 5 years. When pregnant doe antelope enter the winter in good shape and experience a mild winter followed by a wet spring, their improved body condition makes a huge difference in birth rates and the health and survival of their fawns. While pronghorn numbers are still below the highs witnessed prior to the winter of 2010-11, antelope densities have increased again this year. Although this is good news for hunters, pronghorn numbers remain somewhat depressed in Hunt Areas 30 and 31 south of Douglas and Glenrock, in parts of Thunder Basin (Hunt Areas 27 & 29), and in much of the country between Lusk and Newcastle (Hunt Areas 6, 7, & 8). Hunters in southern Niobrara County (Hunt Area 9) should continue to expect fair success along Highway 18-20, and local managers report pronghorn densities are similar to last year. In this area, hunter access to private lands via the Department's PLPW access program continues to provide good hunting opportunity. Areas around Casper are more of a mixed bag. Pronghorn numbers have rebounded nicely south of Casper in Hunt Area 32, while areas west of Casper (Hunt Areas 70-72) still have far fewer pronghorn than managers and hunters would like to see. Hunt Area 73 northwest of Casper has excellent pronghorn numbers and should continue to provide some great hunting opportunity.

Overall, buck numbers are rebounding, and wardens and biologists report buck quality should be better than normal. The excellent moisture received last fall, coupled with improved forage production this spring and summer has resulted in improved pronghorn habitat going into the 2015 hunting season. This translates into improved horn growth and trophy quality. The mild weather during the winter of 2014-15 enabled pronghorn to devote more energy to horn growth as the energetic demands of winter survival were reduced. Given the majority of horn growth occurs during winter and early spring months for pronghorn, bucks were able to get a good head start, and received an additional boost throughout the summer.

## **PINEDALE REGION**

In the Pinedale Region, northern portions of the Sublette pronghorn herd include Hunt Areas 87 through 90. Population estimates for this herd are slightly below desired levels. Lower elevation sagebrush communities throughout the region have been in poor condition over the past several years due to drought. However, forage production improved during 2015 following periodic rainfall during the growing season. With the more abundant forage and available water, pronghorn remain scattered throughout much of the area and sportsmen can expect to see a good number of bucks dispersed throughout the hunt areas. Observations from this summer's

surveys, indicate adult mortality during the winter of 2014-2015 was “below normal” on most winter range complexes in the Pinedale Region.

## **DEER**

### **JACKSON REGION**

The Wyoming Range deer population is designated as a special management herd which provides high quality hunting opportunities, mature age-class deer, and high buck-to-doe ratios. Deer numbers increased over the last few years because of high over-winter survival. The 2+ year old bucks should be well-represented during fall hunting seasons this year. The early portion of the winter allowed animals to remain dispersed on winter ranges and overall the population experienced low winter mortality. Summer rains were timely and maintained forbs in a high nutritional state and, as a result, hunters may notice bucks with exceptional antler growth – similar to 2014.

The southern portion of the herd unit will offer 14 days of antlered deer hunting in Hunt Areas 134 and 135. General license deer hunters will be able to take antlered deer from October 1-14. General license, antlered-only deer hunting will run from September 15 through October 7 in the Greys River (Hunt Area 144), Salt River (Hunt Area 145) and along the east slope of the Wyoming Range (Hunt Area 143).

Nonresident quotas for 2015 in Region G remained at 600 licenses. This strategy is in place to help maintain quality bucks given existing herd ratios and population size.

In addition to mule deer hunting opportunities, a limited quota, doe or fawn white-tailed deer season will again be offered in the Salt River drainage (Hunt Area 145). White-tailed deer numbers along the Salt River have increased and can support a limited doe/fawn hunt. Subsequently, a limited quota, Type 3 license, (60 licenses) is offered in Hunt Area 145 from November 1 through January 31. This license can be purchased in addition to a statewide general deer license.

The Targhee deer herd is a small population on the west side of the Teton Mountains managed to provide recreational hunting opportunities. Population growth is restricted by limited winter range. Proposed hunting seasons in 2015 include a general license season for antlered deer from September 15 through October 7 and new for 2015, a Type 8 licenses (50 licenses) is offered for doe or fawn white-tailed deer.

### **CODY REGION**

Mule deer hunting in the southern portion of the Big Horn Basin will again be tough for most hunt areas in 2015. Mule deer numbers still remain below target levels for all herds. For the past few years, these deer populations have struggled with harsh winters, long term declines in habitat conditions and persistent disease issues. Doe/fawn license quotas have been eliminated in all but a few areas to lessen harvest. Some limited quota areas such as Hunt Areas 37, 119 and 125 should see fair to good hunting, while Hunt Areas 116, 118, 120 along with some general license areas will likely be tough hunting again.

The 2013 Epizootic Hemorrhagic Disease (EHD) outbreak caused a significant die-off of white-tailed deer in most areas in the southern Big Horn Basin so most hunt areas had fewer white-

tailed licenses in 2014. However, white-tailed deer numbers have improved, so opportunity will improve in some areas. Because of public input during the Owl Creek/Meeteetse mule deer initiative, and the public's concern over expanding white-tailed deer numbers, more white-tailed deer hunting opportunity will occur in Hunt Areas 116-120.

For the northern portion of the Bighorn Mountains, buck numbers have been holding steady, but the overall population still has not increased to mid-2000 levels. In 2014, buck harvest decreased slightly compared to 2013. Buck hunting will be fair to good, and doe hunting opportunity will be slightly greater in the Paintrock herd (Hunt Areas 41, 46, 47) and Greybull River herd (Hunt Areas 124 and 165), but greatly reduced along the Shoshone River (Hunt Areas 122 and 123). Doe or fawn licenses were reduced due to fewer damage complaints, but some licenses in areas with chronic agricultural damage are still available for 2015.

Although overall buck:doe ratios are good (24 bucks:100 does), mule deer hunters may have fewer older buck deer available in the North and South Forks of the Shoshone River this season. Deer populations are below desired levels and buck harvest was relatively high during the 2012 and 2013 hunting seasons. A poor fawn crop in 2014, and significant losses during the 2014-2015 winter will translate into fewer yearling bucks in 2015, which should be noticeable to hunters. Opportunities to harvest a mature buck deer in Hunt Areas 105 and 106 will be good in both the later portion of the general season and the November limited quota season in 2015. Recent changes in hunting season structures increased the percentage of older age class bucks in Hunt Area 109, but weather is necessary to trigger deer movements into the area.

The creation of a new Non-resident Deer Region will make it necessary for non-resident deer hunters to choose between hunting migratory deer on public lands west of Cody (Region F) or hunt deer on primarily private lands in the interior of the Bighorn Basin (Region X). This will also make it easier to achieve deer management goals in these areas, which are to build deer numbers in Region F and minimize deer densities and damage to irrigated private lands in Region X.

## **SHERIDAN REGION**

Deer hunting in the Sheridan Region is forecasted to be about average in much of the region. Due to high fawn production in 2014, hunters will likely see more yearling bucks than they have observed in recent years. Most hunt areas in the Sheridan Region have relatively high buck to doe ratios with many mature bucks. Antler growth and body condition of deer appears to be good in those areas where deer have had access to better forage during this summer. There will likely be trophy bucks harvested this fall in the Sheridan Region. One significant change for 2015 is that Deer Hunt Area 10 near Wright is now a limited quota hunt area so hunters with general deer licenses will not be able to hunt there. White-tailed deer hunters in the Sheridan, Buffalo, and Kaycee areas may still notice the negative impacts of the 2013 EHD outbreak with lower numbers of white-tailed deer in some places. Overall, hunters with access to private lands are expected to continue to have high success, while hunters on public lands can expect large numbers of hunters and comparatively lower success. Hunters are advised that if they have access to private land they should consider buying reduced price doe/fawn deer licenses as several thousand doe/fawn licenses are available throughout the region with many of them restricted to private lands. Several deer hunt areas from Sheridan to Kaycee open to doe/fawn rifle hunting beginning on September 1 to address crop damage issues. In Hunt Areas 24, 27, 29, 30 or 33 a person can again purchase an unlimited number of doe/fawn deer licenses until the

quota is exhausted. In Hunt Area 24, no quota (unlimited) was set for the Type 8 white-tailed deer doe/fawn licenses.

### **GREEN RIVER REGION**

Hunters will likely experience better hunting for mule deer in 2015, given recent mild winters, improved fawn production and survival, and ample spring-fall precipitation. Increased fawn production occurred in many Green River Region deer herds the past three years, with the exception of the very dry, low deer density Hunt Areas 100, 101, and 131. Overall survival of deer was very good during the last three winters in all areas resulting in increased deer numbers across the region.

Most Green River Region hunting seasons have been restricted to a 5 to 14-day antlered deer structure with very limited opportunity to hunt does. An antler point restriction is now in place in Hunt Area 131 (4-point restriction), remains in place in Hunt Area 132 (3-point restriction), and has been added to Hunt Areas 133, 134, and 168. Areas with better buck and total deer numbers will have longer hunting seasons. Hunters can expect a good variety of buck age classes to choose from this year, and antler growth appears to be good this year due to very good habitat conditions. Buck ratios generally remain in the special management ( $\geq 30$  bucks:100 does) category in most mule deer hunt areas in the Green River Region.

Mule deer numbers in the South Rock Springs herd (Hunt Areas 101 and 102) appear similar to last year, and some large bucks were observed this summer. License numbers were reduced for the 2014 and 2015 seasons, and those hunters successful in the draw should experience very good hunting this year. The season in Hunt Area 102 will again be open for any deer, and hunters will continue to be restricted to taking antlered deer in Hunt Area 101. Hunters can expect to see good numbers of older-aged bucks in these areas.

Many deer hunt areas in the Green River Region have a few white-tailed deer. In most areas, the season restrictions apply to both species, while a few areas are open for “any” white-tailed deer. White-tails are most common in the Little Snake River Valley portion of Hunt Area 82 and 100, along the Green River between (and including) LaBarge Creek and Interstate 80, within and adjacent to Kemmerer city limits along the Ham’s Fork and along the Black’s Fork near Robertson.

### **LARAMIE REGION**

Hunters should expect to see similar deer hunting throughout the Laramie Region compared to last year. Mule deer herds across the region experienced good over-winter survival rates. Additionally, increased precipitation this past spring and summer has improved habitat and will contribute to good body condition, increased fawn ratios, and increased antler growth in bucks. The increased fat reserves from the better habitat conditions should improve mule deer survival over the coming winter.

White-tailed deer hunting in southeast Wyoming should be good, especially for hunters with access to private land. White-tailed deer populations seem to persist and remain healthy over time, with sporadic reductions occurring due to EHD.

Hunters are encouraged to review the 2015 deer hunting regulations. Hunt Areas 59, 62, and 63 were combined into deer Hunt Area 59. Hunt Areas 64 and 73 were combined into Hunt Area 64. Otherwise, mule deer seasons are similar to the 2014 regulations. The 2012 Arapaho

wildfire in the Laramie Mountains has continued to recover and should increase quality habitat for both deer and elk and provide for better hunting conditions.

Hunters pursuing deer in the Snowy Range or Sierra Madre Mountains should be aware of the ongoing pine beetle epidemic that has resulted in the deaths of millions of lodgepole and ponderosa pines. Avoid dead trees when choosing a camp site. It is also a good idea to have access to a chainsaw.

## **LANDER REGION**

Similar to pronghorn, mule deer populations have markedly declined over the last several years due to poor fawn productivity. But, increased fawn production (and likely survival) were realized in 2014 and mule deer numbers increased slightly. As many fawns as 95:100 does were observed (the Sweetwater DAU, Hunt Areas 96 and 97) and in the Ferris DAU (Hunt Area 87) a 100% increase in fawn numbers were observed (29:100 does in 2013 and 61:100 does in 2014). Regardless, of the 5 herds within Lander Region with population based objectives, all remain below objective after the 2014 hunting season. Concurrent with increased fawn survival in 2014 and likely again in 2015 buck to doe ratios should once again increase and hunters should observe more mule deer. Hunters will have opportunity for increased harvest as antler point restrictions were lifted in all areas except Area 36 and the number of bucks (mostly young bucks) is increased. Hunting seasons in 2015 are similarly conservative to last year and hunters will continue to experience shorter seasons and markedly reduced doe/fawn licenses.

Any white-tailed deer seasons are in place in the Dubois, Lander, Riverton, and Jeffrey City areas. Extended seasons in the South Wind River herd unit (Hunt Areas 92, 94 and 160) for white-tailed deer offers more hunting and harvest opportunity. However, throughout much of the Region white-tailed deer numbers remain relatively low due an apparent Epizootic Hemorrhagic Disease (EHD) outbreak two years ago. As a result, license issuance for white-tailed deer specific licenses remains relatively conservative.

## **CASPER REGION**

White-tailed Deer: Public lands within the Black Hills National Forest continue to provide reasonable hunting opportunity. Here, deer numbers have recovered significantly from the low numbers between 2011 & 2013. While whitetail numbers remain well below the peak densities back in 2006-2007, hunters can expect to see notably more deer in Black Hills this fall. This is a result of improved fawn production and winter survival over the past two years along with the ability of white-tailed deer to prolifically reproduce when environmental conditions are favorable. Nonresident Region A licenses have been increased for the first time since 2010, and resident hunter participation is also expected to rise. Consequently, folks should expect to see hunter numbers on National Forest lands increase somewhat this year. The higher whitetail numbers also mean a return a November 30<sup>th</sup> closing date for whitetail hunting in Hunt Areas 1, 2, and 3. However, Hunt Areas 4, 5, and 6 will continue to close on their traditional date of November 20<sup>th</sup>.

Outside of the Black Hills, white-tailed deer are mainly found on private lands along creeks and rivers. Hunters should expect only fair-to-tough hunting opportunities in these areas. Casper Regional wardens and biologists noted a significant drop in white-tail numbers between 2012 & 2014 due to EHD (hemorrhagic disease) die-offs. However, fawn numbers appear to be good this summer and white-tail numbers are beginning to rebound in many areas. As always in the

Casper Region outside the Black Hills, hunters should plan to secure permission to access private land prior to purchasing a white-tailed deer license and going afield.

**Mule Deer:** Following several years of poor fawn productivity, the number of mature bucks available to hunters has declined across much of the region, especially on public lands where hunting pressure is heavy. However, this trend is beginning to reverse itself as mule deer fawn production and survival was very good last year, with every indication it will be good again this year. While this boost in fawns means mule deer populations are beginning to grow, it will take some time and another few years of good fawn production to translate into improved hunting for mature bucks.

For the most part, already conservative seasons are unchanged for this fall. In 2015, the Department will continue a 3-point or better season in Hunt Area 66 for the third consecutive year. This restriction will curtail harvest of yearling bucks and will likely continue to result in relatively low hunter numbers. Ultimately, this season should continue to enhance yearling buck survival and improve mature buck availability in future years. Due to the antler point restriction and improved fawn production, mature buck ratios have risen dramatically over the past two years in Hunt Area 66, which is welcome news for hunters. Although managers and hunters alike would like to see buck numbers continue to grow, Hunt Area 66 remains popular with hunters because it provides a fair general license hunting experience with good public access. One major change to mule deer hunting in the Casper Region is the shift to a Limited Quota hunting season structure in Hunt Area 10 between Douglas and Gillette. After several years of analysis, trying different season structures, and a concerted public canvassing effort, the Department felt changing this area to Limited Quota was prudent to better manage hunter densities on public lands.

Hunters in the Black Hills and Cheyenne River areas will likely see more deer this fall than they have in recent years, but finding a mature buck to harvest will again be tough, especially on accessible public lands. There are good quality bucks available, but their numbers remain low. Again, several more years of good fawn production and survival will be needed for mule deer numbers to return to desired levels. Deer hunters also need to be aware that while Hunt Areas 1, 2, & 3 will remain open for whitetail hunting through the end of November, Hunt Area 1 closes to mule deer hunting on November 20<sup>th</sup>.

For those hunters lucky enough to draw limited quota licenses in Hunt Areas 34 or 89 west of Casper, there should be good opportunities to harvest a mature buck despite mule deer densities being below desired levels. These areas continue to be managed very conservatively to provide some trophy hunting opportunity and high hunter success rates. Fortunately, these areas have also experienced modest herd growth, which should bode well in future years.

Doe/fawn licenses valid for mule deer have long been eliminated throughout most of the Casper Region, and the few remaining private-land licenses quickly sell out. To reduce hunting pressure in general areas, nonresident general license quotas were cut substantially throughout the Casper Region in recent years. Aside from the increase in Region A licenses in the Black Hills, nonresident quotas have remained very low throughout the rest of the region. In the long run, increased fawn production and survival is what is most needed for mule deer herds to recover throughout Wyoming and the West.



## **PINEDALE REGION**

The Sublette and Wyoming Range deer herds are 2 large populations with special management strategies designed to provide high quality hunting opportunities, older age-class deer, and high buck-to-doe ratios. Hunting conditions should be good this fall. Hunting seasons in all regional hunt areas have been designed to increase overall deer numbers and reduce buck harvest below the 5-year average. To accomplish these goals, a standardized closing date (October 7<sup>th</sup>) for all general license hunting seasons in the Sublette herd unit was implemented in attempts to spread out hunting pressure. In addition, nonresident quotas for Region H will remain at 800 licenses.

In addition to mule deer hunting opportunities, an any white-tailed deer season will be offered again this year. White-tailed deer numbers appear to be stable or increasing along many of the major river corridors. Subsequently, a limited quota, Type 3 license (50 licenses) will be offered in Hunt Areas 138-140, 142, and 143 from October 1 to November 30. This Type 3 license can be purchased in addition to a statewide general deer license.

## **ELK**

### **JACKSON REGION**

General license seasons will run from September 26 to October 31 in the Fall Creek elk herd. Hunters will be allowed to take any elk with the exception of spike bulls through October 18 and then antlered elk with the exception of spike bulls for the remainder of the season. In the early-to mid-2000's, this elk herd experienced several years of sustained population growth. Recent hunting seasons have been successful in reducing elk numbers toward desired levels. The spikes excluded season structure implemented in 2013 should result in more bulls being added to the posthunt population. A limited number of cow or calf licenses will still be offered in an effort to focus harvest pressure on antlerless elk that spend the summer near residential and agricultural lands along the Snake River.

In the Afton herd, the hunting season was lengthened in the lower Greys River. In Hunt Area 90, liberal seasons into November and increased limited quota cow or calf tags will again provide hunting opportunity while attempting to trim the segment of the herd that inhabits the Upper Greys River. Hunters should find trophy class bulls in Greys River hunt areas.

Conservative hunting seasons are proposed for Hunt Areas 70-71, 79, and 81-83 to address low recruitment while trying to maintain bull numbers. In the southern portion of the herd unit in Hunt Areas 75, 77, 78, and 80, cow seasons are proposed to address elk populations that summer along the Snake River corridor in southern Grand Teton National Park and in Hunt Area 78. Hunter opportunities in Hunt Area 78 were modified slightly in 2015 by decreasing the number of archery or muzzle-loading firearm licenses (Type 7 licenses) available and increasing the Type 6 licenses. The changes were made to address landowner concerns regarding the number of limited range licenses and the ability of hunters to take elk causing damage. In Grand Teton National Park, the River Bottom portion of Hunt Area 75 will remain closed this year and Hunt Area 75 Type 4 hunters will again be allowed to hunt in Hunt Area 79 and a portion of Area 81 in an effort to reduce hunter densities in the southern portion of the Park. Hunting seasons in Grand Teton National Park will close a week later in 2015. Hunters will continue to have opportunities to hunt on the National Elk Refuge (Refuge) with reduced price cow or calf licenses. The Department's Hunter Management Access system will be used to allocate access permits for the Refuge. To apply for a National Elk Refuge permission slip, hunters should

access the WGFD website at <https://wgfoapps.wyo.gov/plpwhmprogram/frmHunterManagementHome.aspx/Hunting>. Hunting seasons in the Moran Junction area are proposed to reduce hunting pressure on Teton Wilderness and Yellowstone elk with Hunt Areas 70, 71, and 79 closing on November 1. To address low calf: 100 cow ratios and low recruitment in the Gros Ventre area (Hunt Areas 81-83), the shortened season length and antlered-only spikes-excluded limitation will be maintained in 2015.

## **CODY REGION**

Based on 2014/15 winter trend count flights, some elk areas in the southern Big Horn Basin have fewer elk due to record high harvest during the past couple of years. Although elk numbers may be declining, we are still over target levels in all the southern Basin elk herds and we will again offer ample opportunity for elk hunting in the southern Big Horn Basin, along with some very good bull quality hunting in most areas. We are asking hunters to take advantage of these great elk hunting opportunities. Hunters are reminded to collect blood from their harvested elk for brucellosis sampling, and the WGFD will again be collecting blood and tissue samples from harvested elk as well.

The elk population in the northern Bighorns remains healthy and this fall there will be a good opportunity again to harvest an elk. Bull hunting should be good for those hunters with a type 1 tag, and success usually depends on weather and snow conditions. More licenses and longer seasons for cows (extended into December) should help cow elk hunter success in 2015. While the elk distribution in Hunt Area 41 over the past few years may have discouraged many hunters, longer seasons again in 2015 should give hunters a better chance at connecting with an antlerless elk.

Elk numbers areas near Cody are either at or above population targets. Season changes adopted in 2013 for Hunt Areas 55, 56, 59, and 60 will remain in place for 2015. This includes the conversion of Hunt Area 55 to limited quota licenses, a shorter two-week general license season for non-wilderness areas in Hunt Areas 56 and 59, and an rifle opening date of September 20 for Hunt Area 60. There will be fewer antlerless elk licenses Hunt Area 61 since elk numbers are closer to the population objective. The opportunity to hunt bull elk on a general license in Hunt Area 66 will be limited to the later half of August and the month of September in 2015. As a reminder, hunt areas northwest of Cody (Hunt Areas 51, 53, 54) were changed dramatically in 2014 in an effort to better manage migratory and non-migratory elk population segments. Please review the 2015 elk hunt area map closely prior to applying for your license, or call the Cody Regional Office for more detailed explanation.

## **SHERIDAN REGION**

The Sheridan Region contains some of Wyoming's well known elk hunt areas. Those hunters who were successful in drawing one of the highly sought after limited quota any elk licenses for a hunt area in the Bighorn Mountains, the Rochelle Hills, or the Fortification will have the opportunity for a great hunt with the possibility of bringing home a real trophy. The limited quota "any elk" hunting season in Hunt Area 123 will be open this fall after not being opened since 2013. Because potential hunters know there are some large bulls in this hunt area it was one of the hardest licenses to draw in the state. For those hunters that did not draw a license there are still some leftover antlerless elk licenses available and residents can purchase a general license to hunt in Areas 36 and 37. Success for general license hunters and limited quota antlerless elk license hunters tends to be much lower than those who have a limited quota any elk license, but they can still enjoy time together hunting with family and friends. In a portion of

Hunt Area 37, cow/calf hunting is scheduled to open September 1 and will run through September 30. This season is designed to allow rifle hunters the opportunity to harvest an elk before they leave a small portion of public land or harvest elk off the national forest. Antlerless elk (Type 4 license) hunting in Hunt Area 38 will again begin on October 1 which should significantly increase hunter success.

A third year of enhanced brucellosis surveillance will be conducted in the Bighorn Mountain elk hunt areas. Elk hunters are encouraged to collect blood samples from harvested elk in the blood tubes provided as part of the brucellosis surveillance project. WGFD personnel in the field will have spare blood tubes available and will accept samples from successful hunters.

## **GREEN RIVER REGION**

Elk numbers remain high and continue to increase across the region, with most populations remaining above objective, with exception of the two special management herds, South Rock Springs and Steamboat. Regional personnel expect another above average hunting season for elk hunters with ample licenses and long seasons.

The Steamboat or “Desert” elk herd (Hunt Area 100) is estimated to be slightly below objective and licenses were reduced for 2015. As per current special management direction, bull ratios remain high for this population. This area continues to be extremely popular with hunters, probably due to the abundance of mature bulls and limited time it requires to harvest an animal.

The West Green River herd (Hunt Areas 102-105) remains slightly above objective, especially in the western portion of Hunt Areas 103 and 104. As a result, the number of antlerless elk licenses remain numerous in this portion of the herd unit, while antlerless opportunity was reduced in the more popular Hunt Area 102. We will continue to maintain a shorter “any elk” general season to continue managing for higher bull-to-cow ratios and older-aged males.

The Department significantly increased harvest in the South Rock Springs herd (Hunt Areas 30-32) in recent years due to growing numbers of elk. This interstate population is difficult to manage since elk move freely between Wyoming, Colorado, and Utah to escape hunting pressure and utilize existing seasonal habitats. The Department slightly increased opportunity in this area for 2015, and hunting will be very good for those who draw licenses. Bull ratios are high and many older-aged trophy class animals were harvested in 2012, 2013, and 2014.

Hunting remains very liberal across much of the Sierra Madre elk herd to address a population that has been significantly above objective for many years. Issues surrounding hunter density, access, road density, and perennially low bull ratios continue to impact the Department’s efforts to manage this population. Increased harvest of antlerless elk in Hunt Areas 13, 15, 21, and 108 will be achieved through a combination of general any elk, general antlerless, and reduced price cow-calf licenses. Recent efforts regarding these seasons has resulted in fewer elk and improved bull ratios and bull age of harvest.

Seasons in the Petition herd (Hunt Area 124) will be the same as last year. We will continue to put the majority of harvest in this area on the female segment of the herd to limit population growth. This area is becoming a popular area with “trophy” bull hunters. Hunters that plan to use the Tipton Hunter Management Area, are reminded to check permit availability and ranch rules on the Department’s website, since permit numbers are limited.

Elk hunting in the Uinta herd unit (Hunt Areas 106 and 107) and elk numbers in the “Wyoming portion” of this interstate herd unit continues to be affected more by snowfall patterns than other elk populations in southern Wyoming. Elk in this herd move between Wyoming and Utah, creating challenges for sportsmen in Wyoming. Additionally, access is a concern in this herd, particularly in Hunt Area 106 where private lands are often leased to outfitters. The population is managed to minimize damage to stored grass hay, but snow depths on the Northslope in Utah dictate the number of elk wintering in Wyoming more than hunting seasons.

## **LARAMIE REGION**

A majority of the elk herds in the Laramie Region are above their population objectives and should provide hunters with excellent hunting opportunities. Elk populations across the region have high bull ratios (greater than 25 bulls:100 cows) and productive calf ratios (greater than 30 calves:100 cows), demonstrating healthy elk populations with plenty of bulls available for harvest. Hunters should read regulations for their hunt area, as some seasons have changed from the 2014 season. There is a new type 9 (archery only) season for Hunt Area 11 this year. This hunt will allow type 9 hunters to archery hunt area 11 for the month of September, sharing the season with type 1 (any weapon) hunters from September 15-30th.

Elk have learned to avoid areas with high hunting pressure, but plenty of good elk hunting should be available away from well-traveled roads and trails. A few Public Land, Private Wildlife Hunter Management Areas provide access opportunities in the region but, as with other species, access to private lands is limited in many areas. Hunters should plan ahead for places to hunt. The Laramie region will again have a Hunter Management Assistance Program (or HMAP) in Hunt Area 7 this year.

## **LANDER REGION**

Like much of Wyoming, elk populations are doing well in the Lander Region. Calf production remains on par with previous years and is not a concern throughout the Region. Similarly, observed bull to cow ratios remain strong over most of central Wyoming. So, there is a lot of hunting opportunity throughout the region. For the second year, hunters in the Dubois country (Hunt Areas 67 and 68) will not be allowed to harvest spikes. This restriction was implemented in 2014 based on input received at public meetings and is designed to reduce harvest on younger bulls. Favorable weather conditions during this fall’s hunting seasons should result in excellent harvest rates and hunter success in all hunt areas. With elk herds above objective in almost all locations, license levels and season dates have been designed to reduce populations toward management targets.

## **CASPER REGION**

High elk numbers continue to provide outstanding hunting opportunities throughout the Casper Region. Nearly all elk hunt areas in the Casper Region have opening dates and season lengths nearly identical to those of the past several years. Elk hunters should continue to enjoy remarkable numbers of elk and good hunting success, especially if the weather cooperates. Elk hunters in the southern Bighorns (Hunt Area 120) should again expect to see improved bull quality and availability, with good access to antlerless elk as well. Hunters in the Rattlesnake Hills (Hunt Area 23) should again expect moderate hunting quality as a high percentage of those elk continue to seek refuge on private lands with restricted access. This area can be “hit or miss,” as hunting can be exceptional when elk return to public lands, as they periodically do throughout the hunting season. Elk hunters in the Laramie Range (Hunt Areas 7 and 19) should continue to enjoy outstanding hunt quality, especially for bull elk, as bull numbers and trophy

quality remain strong. Casper Region managers noted a substantial increase in the number of large trophy quality bulls in Hunt Area 7 following last year's hunting season, which should bode well for the 2015 season. Access for cow elk hunting on private lands continues to be relatively good in Hunt Area 7, especially later in the season. Hunters are also reminded to take full advantage of the Department's Walk-In-Areas and Hunter Management Areas, which provide tremendous opportunities throughout the region, but especially for antlerless elk in Hunt Area 7.

Those hunters with general licenses should not plan to hunt in Converse, Niobrara or Weston counties unless they have secured access to private lands known to contain elk. General license areas within these counties are not managed for a sustainable elk population as most of these lands do not contain quality elk habitat. Thus, elk occur only in isolated areas and almost exclusively on private lands in Hunt Areas 126 and 129.

In the Black Hills, elk hunters should continue to see improved hunting opportunity in limited quota Hunt Area 1, which is predominantly comprised of public lands. In this hunt area, harvest pressure has been reduced the past couple of years to improve hunter success. However, elk availability in this small area is largely dependent on the amount of disturbance elk encounter from human activities in the woods. Given high road densities and vehicular traffic, silvicultural (timber management) activities, and even archery hunting pressure, disturbance to elk in this area can heavily influence their distribution on National Forest lands. Last year, productivity and over-winter survival of elk was good in northeast Wyoming. On the surrounding private lands, which make up Hunt Area 117, elk numbers and bull quality appear to be similar to the past few years, as this herd is holding fairly steady. North of I-90, Hunt Area 116 will continue to be hunted under a general license structure with some reduced priced cow/calf license being issued to address agricultural damage concerns. The elk season here is intended to facilitate elk harvest on private lands, where elk numbers remain above desired levels. Since elk are almost exclusively found on private land in Hunt Area 116, there is very little opportunity to harvest an elk on public lands. Therefore, general license hunters are encouraged to secure private land access before going afield, and should not expect to find many elk on the Bearlodge portion of the Black Hills National Forest.

## **PINEDALE REGION**

There are 4 elk herds managed within the Pinedale Region. Liberal seasons have been in place for several years and are designed to move populations toward post hunting season objective levels while maintaining at least 20 bulls per 100 cows in post-hunt populations.

The Piney elk herd has exceeded the established population objective over the last several years. In an effort to reduce this herd, seasons in Hunt Areas 92 and 94 will open October 15<sup>th</sup> for general license any elk hunting and extend to November 23<sup>rd</sup> for antlerless elk. Limited quota cow or calf licenses will again be offered in Hunt Areas 92 and 94 and will open on October 1 and run to November 24<sup>th</sup> to address surplus numbers of elk along the east slope of the Wyoming Range.

Elk numbers in the Pinedale herd remain near the upper limits of the post season trend objective. This fall's hunting seasons will again allow any elk to be taken by general license holders for both Hunt Areas 97 and 98 from October 1<sup>st</sup> to October 15<sup>th</sup> and then switch to antlerless elk from October 16<sup>th</sup> to November 20<sup>th</sup>. The Type 1 limited quota licenses for Area 97 were reduced by 75 in an effort to address license availability and access for hunters. The season

length for the reduced price limited quota Type 6 license will again run from September 20<sup>th</sup> to November 20<sup>th</sup> in both hunt areas.

The 2015 hunting season in the Hoback herd have been extended through November 15 south of Highway 189/191 is similar to 2014 for both Hunt Areas 86 and 87. The herd is being managed to provide recreational opportunities while addressing low elk numbers in Hunt Area 87 north of Highway 189/191 and elk damage near private lands in Hunt Area 87.

For the Upper Green River herd, sportsmen can anticipate good hunting conditions during the 2015 hunting season. This herd remains near the upper limits of the post season trend objective of 2,500 animals and similar to the 2014 hunting season, reduced price limited quota Type 6 licenses will be available for Hunt Areas 93, 95 and 96. This herd is managed using a combination of general and limited quota licenses to stabilize elk numbers in the population.

## **MOOSE**

### **JACKSON REGION**

The Targhee moose herd is designated as special management and conservative hunting seasons will be maintained in 2015 in the combined Hunt Areas 16 and 37. Low moose densities and poor calf:100 cow ratios are a concern in this herd unit. Hunting seasons in 2015 will offer 5 licenses for the combined Hunt Areas 16 and 37. The Jackson herd calf:100 cow ratios improved during 2015 but, unfortunately, several years of low ratios and a lower number of cows observed in the population precluded any significant population growth and resulted in the elimination of antlerless tags for all hunt areas. Hunt Areas 7, 14, 15 and 32 will again be closed due to low calf:100 cow ratios and declining population trends. Five antlered moose licenses will again be offered in 2015 for the combined Hunt Areas 17 and 28. In the upper Gros Ventre drainage, Hunt Area 18 will remain at 5 antlered moose licenses. Conservative seasons are again proposed to address the low population densities and limited recruitment the moose herd experienced in recent years. In the Jackson portion of the Sublette moose herd, management is focusing on stabilizing moose numbers in Hunt Areas 10, 20, 21, and 23. The number of bull licenses offered in Area 23 was reduced to 20 licenses for 2015. Mature bulls are consistently being harvested in the Sublette herd and the opportunity to harvest a trophy class Shiras moose has increased in recent years. Throughout all of these hunt areas, the average antler spread continues to approach 40 inches.

In an effort to standardize opening dates of the hunting season in the Jackson area, moose seasons will again open five days later on September 15. Because of the anticipated warm weather projected for this fall, hunters should plan on hunting when temperatures are the coolest and moose are likely to be feeding – at first light and early evening.

### **CODY REGION**

Moose densities in Hunt Areas 9 and 11 in the Absaroka Mountains remain low, but hunters who are lucky enough to draw a license should have good success. Harvest success for these moose areas still runs above 85%, with most hunters harvesting a mature bull. The 2015 season should again have good success with several nice (+45”) bulls being available.

### **SHERIDAN REGION**

Moose inhabit many areas of the Bighorn Mountains but are most often observed in riparian habitats along major streams. Limited quota moose licenses for any moose in Hunt Areas 1, 34,

and 42 are some of the most highly sought after licenses in Wyoming. It is expected that there will be some large mature bulls harvested again this fall as some “trophy” have been observed during the summer of 2015. Although bull moose can be observed during the summer along roads and highways soon after the hunting season begins many bulls head for deep cover making for a challenging hunt.

### **GREEN RIVER REGION**

Moose populations in the Uinta and Lincoln herd units remain down and this fall’s season will remain conservative. Disease (parasite) concerns have been documented and significant losses appear to have occurred, although recent losses are much lower than previous observed losses, and increased moose numbers have been documented. Population trend is upward on all Green River moose herds and increased opportunity is forthcoming if this trend continues. Antlerless moose licenses have been eliminated in the Uinta and Lincoln moose herds, with the exception of antlerless moose opportunity in Hunt Area 33 along the Green River. Bull hunters will find ample opportunity to harvest large, older-aged bulls, particularly in Hunt Area 26.

Hunt Area 33 was reopened last year for the first time in 10 years to address moose numbers and habitat issues on Seedskadee National Wildlife Refuge. However, no antlerless moose were harvested in this area in 2014, so the area is open for only antlerless moose (except cow moose with calf at side) in 2015.

### **LARAMIE REGION**

Hunting should be excellent for those hunters with a Hunt Area 38/41 moose license. Snowy Range moose licenses were decreased by 5 for Type 1’s, and 10 for Type 4’s in 2014. The reduction in licenses was done in an effort to maintain a healthy moose population and a quality moose hunting experience. This hunt area is one of the premier moose areas in the nation. Moose are found scattered throughout the Medicine Bow National Forest and adjacent lands. Ample opportunity exists to harvest a trophy bull for hunters willing to venture away from roads. Good calf production in this herd often makes it difficult for antlerless moose hunters to locate a cow without a calf at her side. Hunters are encouraged to avoid highway corridors and popular tourist areas when pursuing their moose.

The Wyoming Game and Fish and the Wyoming Cooperative Fish and Wildlife Research Unit initiated a moose research project in March of 2015 with the capture of 30 cow moose. Hunters who have this licence have received a letter asking them to assist WGFD in the collection of some biological samples for this moose study. Also, any hunters that observe a collared (collars are white, also have colored ear tags) cow moose in the Pole Mountain, Snowy Range, or Sierra Madre Mountains are asked to contact WGFD with the following information: total moose observed, gender of moose, age (calf/adult), and a GPS coordinates for the observation.

### **LANDER REGION**

Both of the Lander Region’s moose herds are below desired population objective levels and continue to struggle. Although moose calf survival likely remained near average in 2014, overall herd performance and population size continue to be of concern. Seasons for 2015 will be identical to those held in 2014. Moose hunters in the Lander herd unit enjoyed harvesting some exceptional quality bull moose in 2014, as a result of conservative hunting seasons. A similar harvest is expected in 2015. Hunt Area 30 license holders will continue to be allowed to hunt in Hunt Area 2 from November 1 through the 20<sup>th</sup>. Quotas remain the same in the Lander Region.



## **PINEDALE REGION**

The Pinedale Region manages the majority of the Sublette moose herd unit which is designed to provide recreational opportunities and maintain high bull:cow ratios. The Sublette herd remains below the mid-winter trend count objective, but has seen slow, steady growth in recent years. Since 2003, a total of 395 permits were eliminated. This reduction in harvest has been successful in reversing a downward trend in this population. The 2015 seasons are targeted at maintaining quality bull ratios and an average harvest age of 4 years old. Trophy class bulls continue to be harvested in this portion of the herd unit with the average antler spread approaching 40 inches. During the early portion of the season, many bulls may be found in the cooler, heavily timbered slopes except at first light and dusk when temperatures are the coolest and moose are likely to be feeding.

## **BIGHORN SHEEP**

### **JACKSON REGION**

Sheep hunting opportunities for the Targhee herd will again be offered in 2014 with two resident licenses available. With the exception of 2012 when no sheep were harvested, one ram was harvested each year from 2006 to 2014. For the Jackson Sheep Herd, the 2015 hunting licenses will be increased to 11 licenses in Hunt Area 7. Licenses were reduced in 2013 after managers detected pneumonia-related mortalities across all age classes during 2012 and early-2013. Despite the detection of pneumonia in this population, the average age of harvested rams was 7.5 years old in 2014. While it is still unclear what impacts the current disease outbreak may have on this herd, sheep population trends indicate ram numbers were high during late-spring 2015 and hunters should experience a good hunt this fall.

### **CODY REGION**

In 2014, Hunt Area 5 experienced the lowest hunter success (77%) in the past 15 years. Although the average age of harvested rams remained between 7-8 years, the time it took a hunter to harvest a ram almost doubled (13.2 days), compared to 7 days in previous years. In addition, the winter of 2010/11 was severe enough in Hunt Area 5 to believe higher than normal winter mortality and/or stress related diseases occurred. Several classification/trend flights have been conducted in Hunt Area 5 since then, and we observed about a 40-50% decline in the number of sheep compared to the previous 10-year-average. Because of these declines, the license quota in Hunt Area 5 was reduced, and those hunters lucky enough to draw a license will have to put in more effort compared to previous years, especially if looking for an older age-class ram. The Type 6 ewe/lamb licenses in Hunt Area 5 were eliminated for the 2015 season.

Overall, bighorn sheep hunting in the Absaroka Mountains should be good for those lucky enough to draw a license. In 2014, the average age of harvested rams in Areas 1-5 was between 7-8 years old. License adjustments have been made in Hunt Areas 4 and 5; however, as a result of recently documented winter losses in an effort to preserve the age distribution of harvested rams. Hunt Area 12 bighorn sheep herd in the northern Bighorns continues to increase and do well, and several older class rams were observed during the summer flight this past year. We are offering 4 licenses for Hunt Area 12 sheep for the first time this year. Past hunters have all harvested mature rams so hunting should be very good for the 3 resident and 1 nonresident hunter lucky enough to draw the coveted 4 licenses for this small herd.



## **LARAMIE REGION**

Timely precipitation benefitted bighorn sheep in the Laramie Region. Bighorn sheep hunting in the Laramie Peak area was very good last fall and should be again this year. Ram ratios in Hunt Area 19 are very good and lamb production has increased during the last 3 years. The future looks bright for this herd and hunters can expect a good opportunity to find a trophy ram this fall. Bighorn sheep Hunt Areas 18 and 21 are closed for the 2014 season. There is a new bighorn sheep hunt area in the Laramie region, it is hunt area 26 and includes the Bennet Mountains east of Seminoe Reservoir.

## **LANDER REGION**

Lamb production continues to be a concern in the Whiskey Mountain bighorn sheep population, though it increased to 36:100 in 2015. Lamb productivity has been depressed in the herd unit for nearly 20 years and while it has certainly impacted population growth, there are still plenty of rams for harvest. Hunter success in 2015 should be similar to the past 5-year average of 60%. In fact, the ram to ewe ratio in 2015 increased and remains strong at 59:100 and is above average. No changes in license quotas are slated for 2015 hunting seasons in an effort to continue building quality into this herd. Hunt Area 22 (Dubois Badlands) will once again be open for hunting any ram in 2015. Four licenses will be valid in Hunt Area 22 from September 1-30. After September 30, these licenses will also be valid in Hunt Area 5. Hunt Area 9 (Dinwoody) will be open again for hunting any ram in 2015. Four licenses will be issued. Sheep hunting in Hunt Area 9 can be extremely difficult and will require a lot of effort to locate mature rams. Success in 2014 was 75% and greatly improved compared to 25% in 2013. Department personnel reconnaissance of Hunt Area 9 in late summer 2014 confirmed presence of several mature rams. Hunt Area 17 (Seminoe) in the Seminoe Mountains will be open for the third year in 2015 allowing one resident hunter to harvest a ram. The Seminoe herd has been doing well since the supplemental releases in 2010, 2011, and most recently in March, 2015. With this latest augmentation it is estimated there will be ~100 sheep in the population after the lambing season. It is expected the license recipient will have excellent opportunity to harvest a ram.

## **PINEDALE REGION**

There is one sheep herd (Darby Mountain) plus a portion of the Whiskey Mountain Herd managed by the Pinedale Region. The 2015 bighorn sheep hunting season for Hunt Area 24 is closed due to the lack of mature rams, low lamb numbers, and poor recruitment of sheep from juvenile to older-age classes. In 1998, this hunt area was also closed to hunting when total sheep numbers and availability of mature rams declined below acceptable levels. There are no proposed changes for the Whiskey Mountain Hunt Areas 8 and 23 and licenses will remain at 12.

# **MOUNTAIN GOATS**

## **JACKSON REGION**

The Palisades goat herd (Hunt Area 2) is an extension of Idaho's Palisades mountain goat population that has expanded into Wyoming. This interstate goat population continues to migrate across state lines during annual movements to summer and winter ranges. For 2015, twelve licenses will be available and the season will run from September 1 to October 31.

An August 2014 aerial survey located 165 goats on Wyoming summer ranges. Trophy class billies continue to be taken in this herd. During the 2010 hunting season, several record book goats were taken and there were several trophy class billies noted during 2012 survey efforts.

Hunters should expect to find goats in steep, rocky terrain with trips of up to 5 miles away from roads.

## **CODY REGION**

Mountain goats in Area 1 are currently doing well and hunter success is generally 90-100% and drawing a license is the hardest part of hunting mountain goats in Wyoming. The creation of Hunt Area 3 increased opportunity for hunters to hunt a goat in hard to access backcountry with low densities of goats, and the past 3 years hunters have had relatively good success there. Hunters are encouraged to harvest male mountain goats (billies), as mountain goat populations are generally not very productive and experience relatively high natural mortality. The 2015 season should again see high success rates in the Beartooth goat herd.

## **BISON**

### **JACKSON REGION**

Beginning in 2014, hunters began applying for a wild bison license through a random drawing. The 2015 hunting season was shortened by three days and will close on January 15. Winter trend counts indicate harvest levels have stabilized the bison population, but additional harvest is needed to reduce the population toward the agency's post hunt population objective of 500 animals.

In addition to being allowed to hunt on the national forest, license holders will be allowed to access the National Elk Refuge by obtaining a permission slip for the Refuge through the WGFD website at <https://wgfoapps.wyo.gov/plpwhmprogram/frnHunterManagementHome.aspx>

The application process to obtain a National Elk Refuge bison permission slip will be very similar to the process the Department used for hunters who applied for an elk permission slip on the National Elk Refuge.

Additional bison hunting information will be available on the National Elk Refuge website at [http://www.fws.gov/refuge/national\\_elk\\_refuge/](http://www.fws.gov/refuge/national_elk_refuge/)

## **UPLAND GAME BIRDS - SMALL GAME**

### **SAGE GROUSE – STATEWIDE**

Counts of sage-grouse on their spring breeding areas (leks) were 66 percent higher in 2015 than 2014. This should be good news for grouse hunters this fall. But, as with most other game birds, sage-grouse hunting success also depends on nest success and chick survival. In general, moist conditions lead to good plant and insect production which results in higher nest success and chick survival. But cold, wet conditions can also reduce these key demographics. Reports from the field suggest a mixed bag in this regard so hunting should be at least on par with 2014 from the statewide perspective. Hunters may see local variation.

While regulated hunting has not been demonstrated to be a threat to population sustainability, sage-grouse are currently a species of intense management concern so hunting seasons are set very conservatively with a short season and small bag limits. Additionally, sage-grouse hunting

is self-regulatory in that hunters tend to hunt less and harvest fewer birds when populations are depressed.

## **JACKSON REGION**

Expect good hunting for ruffed and blue grouse in the Salt River, Wyoming, Teton, Gros Ventre, and Snake River Mountains. The mild spring seems to have resulted in good production for both species. In the past 3 years, cold, wet spring conditions resulted in poor initial nesting success, but a strong renesting effort by ruffed grouse produced some large broods.

Sage-grouse hunting season is closed in the Snake River drainage in the Jackson Region and that portion of the Pinedale Region in Hoback Basin.

There is a healthy population of snowshoe hares within the region; however, several areas of the Bridger-Teton National Forest are closed to winter access beginning either December 1 or December 15. Hunters should check with the Bridger-Teton National Forest for details of their winter travel plan.

## **CODY REGION**

Success for upland game bird hunting in 2015 for the southern portions of the Big Horn Basin looks to be favorable. Several chukar, hun, sage grouse and pheasant broods have been observed this summer with good numbers of chicks. Upland bird hunting in 2014 was better than predicted so there are a few more birds out there to help with 2015 production. Bird hunters need to remember, hunting has little to no affect on upland bird populations, and that weather and habitat play a much more significant role than hunting.

A general license spring turkey hunting season will occur in 2015 for Hunt Area 4 (excluding the Yellowtail WHMA). Because of this general season, hunters should expect to see a few more hunters in the field this spring; however, after a year or two hunter numbers will likely drop off since access to private where most turkey hunting occurs will limit opportunity. We are seeing an expanding population of turkeys into new country, so if hunters do a little scouting and asking landowner permission, they should be able to find a spot to hunt.

## **SHERIDAN REGION**

Game bird hunters in the Sheridan Region during 2015 may have better results than in 2014. There was some good residual cover for nesting habitat in the spring of 2015. Field personnel report observing some hens with good sized broods. Spring “lek” (breeding ground) surveys of sage-grouse showed that sage-grouse numbers were the highest since 2008. Wild turkey numbers vary throughout the region. In the Buffalo and Sheridan areas there were already large numbers of turkeys so it is expected there will be plenty of birds. Pheasants from the Wyoming Game and Fish Department bird farm will again be released on several Sheridan Region Walk-In Areas. Hunters are reminded that most game bird hunting occurs on private land except for blue grouse hunting on the Bighorn Mountains and pheasant hunting on the WGFD Walk-In Areas.

## **GREEN RIVER REGION**

Sage-grouse hunting in Green River Region should be good in 2015, much better than recent years. Observed brood size continues to vary widely locally with precipitation, but is generally pretty high this year across most of the region. As is typical, wetter, higher habitats are producing larger broods this year. Additionally, the number of males attending leks was generally up this year in much of southwest Wyoming, which should result in better hunting this year when compared to recent years. Grouse numbers showed the highest increases in the

eastern, northern, and western portions of the region (Carbon, northern Sweetwater, and Lincoln/Uinta counties, respectively).

Mountain grouse (ruffed grouse and blue grouse) will vary by locality, although some pockets of good hunting should occur. Observed broods this year are large and robust. Both blue grouse and ruffed grouse hunting should be good in the Wyoming Range, and blue grouse hunting will likely be good in the Sierra Madre Mountains. Hunters are reminded they may harvest a limit of three ruffed grouse and three blue (dusky) grouse again this year – a change from the previous combined “mountain grouse” bag limit. Since many local names for these two species of grouse exist (e.g. pine grouse, willow grouse, etc.), hunters are cautioned regarding proper identification of the two species in order to avoid an overlimit violation.

Grouse hunters are also reminded the season remains closed for sharp-tailed grouse west of the Continental Divide, which includes all sharp-tailed grouse in the Sierra Madre Mountains and foothills.

Cottontail rabbit numbers are at peak cycle this year in Southwest Wyoming, with numbers greatly increased from the past several years. 2015 will be an exceptional year to take young hunters out and let them enjoy this bounty. Snowshoe hares, a species that receives very little harvest pressure in the Green River Region, are numerous in some of the higher elevations of the southern Wyoming Range, Uinta, and Sierra Madre Mountains, providing additional winter hunting opportunity.

### **LARAMIE REGION**

Spring moisture and heavy rains throughout July have helped improve nesting and brood-rearing cover for all upland game within the Laramie Region. Brood observations for most upland game birds were difficult this year due to the above average height and density of vegetation, but those that were observed showed promising numbers. Good pheasant production (~15,000 birds raised) at the Downar Bird Farm will provide hunters the opportunity to hunt pheasants on designated walk-in areas throughout Goshen, Laramie and Platte Counties, and the Springer and Glendo special permit hunts. Blue grouse hunting should be better than last year for the Snowy Range and Sierra Madre Mountains as field observations suggest a productive year for blue grouse. Sage grouse lek counts were up this spring, indicating a few more birds than last year. Increased nesting and brood rearing habitat should help sage grouse as well. Sharp-tailed grouse lek attendance was also up this spring. Sharp-tailed grouse hunters should have an easier time finding and harvesting birds this year. Turkeys should be plentiful for fall and spring hunters based on high quality habitat and average poult production. Cottontail rabbits and snowshoe hares remain abundant throughout the Laramie Region.

### **LANDER REGION**

Seasons for upland game birds will be similar to previous years. Overall, blue and ruffed grouse numbers remained stable during 2014. Of particular note were the increased numbers of chukars and hungarian partridge observed by hunters and Department personnel during the 2014/15 hunting season. With continued mild winter conditions we'll likely see similar or increased numbers in 2015/16. Sage-grouse numbers throughout the region will likely remain similar to that observed in 2014 and hunters should expect similar success.

The Sand Mesa and Ocean Lake Wildlife Habitat Management Areas, and the one-day youth hunt at Sand Mesa proved to be very popular with pheasant hunters and will be continued in

2015. This year's youth hunt will occur on Saturday, November 21<sup>st</sup>. Bird farm pheasants will again be released at the Sand Mesa and Ocean Lake Habitat Units through November.

**A significant change in season structure is in place for the Sand Mesa and Ocean Lake Wildlife Habitat Management Areas: during the week shooting hours will be 8:00 a.m. (no change) to 2:00 p.m. (changed from 4:00 p.m.). This earlier closing will allow more time and better conditions for releasing birds during the daylight hours. This should increase the number of birds staying on the units and available for hunters the next day. Also, to allow maximum hunting opportunity on the weekends (when birds are not released) shooting hours are from 8:00 a.m. to sunset and during the December 7 – 31 season shooting hours are expanded from ½ hour before sunrise to sunset.**

Cottontails appear to continue to increase throughout most of the Lander Region in 2015 and may provide for better cottontail rabbit hunting opportunity this fall and winter. Snowshoe hares and red squirrels appear to be stable this year within the Lander Region. For those interested in pursuing these animals, hunting conditions should be fair-to-good in 2015.

### **CASPER REGION**

Based on lek counts, sage grouse numbers have increased substantially in central Wyoming over the past two years. In northeast Wyoming, sage-grouse populations have also increased, although not to the extent that they have in the rest of the State. Following 7 straight years of very poor chick production/survival, the number of chicks per hen rebounded in 2014 as weather and grass production was favorable for better nest success and chick survival. At this point, it appears chick production and survival may be even better in 2015 as biologists have observed large broods this summer. As sage-grouse numbers have declined dramatically over the past 7-8 years, the Department has maintained very conservative hunting seasons. Regardless, grouse numbers continue to remain high enough to ensure hunters have not had much trouble filling their daily bag limits, especially south and west of Casper. Hunters should see some improvement in 2015, with a higher number of young-of-the-year chicks available for harvest and a good crop of yearling birds given the good production last year. Extremely conservative season limitations will remain in effect in northeast Wyoming with a 3-day season and a daily bag/possession limit of 2/4 birds, respectively. Many other portions of the Casper Region in eastern Wyoming remain closed to sage-grouse hunting due to marginal habitats and low numbers of birds.

Following a period of decline, blue grouse numbers in the Casper Region were excellent in 2014, with anecdotal reports indicating chick production has been good again this year. Hunters should therefore expect to see relatively good blue grouse densities in the northern Laramie Range this fall. While blue grouse numbers should be relatively good in this area, hunters are reminded the Laramie Range typically does not have as high of densities as some of Wyoming's other major mountain ranges such as the Bighorns or Sierra Madres.

Chukar and Hungarian partridge numbers in the Casper Region continue to remain at extremely low densities, although some sizeable broods of "Huns" have been observed around Casper for the second straight year. Hunters should not expect to see huntable numbers of partridge in most of the Casper Region, although there will certainly be small pockets with sizeable coveys of "Huns" in some areas. Even in good years, hunters in the Casper Region should not expect to see chukar and Hungarian partridge densities similar to the Bighorn Basin and areas around Buffalo and Sheridan where better partridge habitats can be found.

Wild turkey numbers in the Black Hills dropped substantially between 2010 and 2013 when poor weather conditions reduced poult production and survival of all age classes. This trend began to reverse itself last year as poult production returned to near average levels and over-winter survival was much better. So far this summer, wardens and biologists report poult production is a mixed bag, with some hens having very large broods while others appear to have not successfully nested. As a result, mature wild turkey numbers in the Black Hills will remain well below what hunters were accustomed to prior to 2010. However, the future appears a little brighter as overall turkey numbers are starting to grow. In summary, wild turkey hunting opportunities remain only fair in the Black Hills, but are improving.

Wild turkeys are also bouncing back in most of the Casper Region outside of the Black Hills. As a result, fall wild turkey hunting on a general license should be fair to good throughout the remainder of the Casper Region, as access to hunt them on private lands remains good. In general, poult production has also improved outside of the Black Hills over the past two years, resulting in relatively stable wild turkey numbers throughout most of the region.

### **PINEDALE REGION**

The 2015 upland game bird seasons for this region are similar to last year. Sage-grouse seasons will run in late-September to shift the hunt later in the fall and reduce vulnerability of hens with broods.

Blue and ruffed grouse seasons are also the same as in past years. Ruffed and blue grouse production has been variable throughout the region. The mild 2015 spring seems to have resulted in good production for both species.

## **MIGRATORY GAME BIRDS**

### **STATEWIDE OVERVIEW**

Habitat conditions for breeding waterfowl have continued to improve with increased precipitation throughout the state. The later spring and cooler temperatures in April and early May possibly affected production of early nesting species such as mallard; however a good re-nesting effort was expected. In general, Wyoming hunters should see better than average populations of locally-raised ducks. It is important to bear in mind that variation in weather and migration patterns will ultimately influence the availability of birds throughout the hunting season. Effort put into pre-season scouting and locating prime hunting spots will pay dividends in the overall success hunters experience.

### **DUCKS**

In 2015 a record high number of ducks (49.5 million) was counted during the May Breeding Waterfowl and Habitat Survey conducted each year by the USFWS. This was 43% higher than the long-term average. The majority of ducks that migrate into Wyoming come from Alberta and Montana. Duck populations in these two regions totaled 7.07 million ducks – nearly identical to last year’s population and 35% above the long-term average. The number of ponds holding water in Alberta and Montana declined 10%, but was still 47% above the long-term average. Overall, this means the number of ducks that migrate through Wyoming this fall should be similar to last year’s, dependent on the weather.

## **DARK GEESE**

The Canada geese we harvest in Wyoming generally come from 3 populations – the Rocky Mountain Population (RMP), Hi-Line Population (HLP), and the Central Flyway Arctic-nesting Goose Populations (CFAN). RMP geese are found west of the Continental Divide and in the Wind River and Bighorn River Basins as well as western Carbon and Natrona counties. Large geese farther east belong to the HLP and smaller geese belong to CFAN. The RMP index in 2015 was 46% higher than in 2014. However, habitat conditions were generally fair to poor throughout the breeding range and lower than average production is expected. The HLP increased 31%, but breeding habitat conditions were likewise only fair. Late rains may have also affected survival of some broods. A fall-flight similar to last year's is predicted for both populations. The CFAN population estimate was similar to that of last year. Arctic breeding habitat conditions were excellent and should result in above-average production. However, CFAN geese normally make up a small proportion of dark geese harvested in the state.

## **LIGHT GEESE**

Most of the light geese that migrate through Wyoming are from the Western Central Flyway Population (WCFP). This population includes lesser snow geese and Ross's geese that nest in the western and central arctic. During 2015, 243,200 geese were counted on wintering grounds and represented an 8% decrease from the number counted in 2014. Although production of WCFP snow geese is expected to be very low in 2015, an average fall flight is predicted. Snow and Ross's geese typically bypass Wyoming during the fall migration, with only small groups sporadically encountered. The majority of the hunting takes place during the Light Goose Conservation Order in the spring when more than 100,000 light geese stage in southeast Wyoming. Hunting success is generally affected by the number of inexperienced juvenile birds in the fall flight. With a low proportion of juveniles expected, hunting may be more difficult.

## **SNIFE**

Based on North American Breeding Bird Survey data, snipe populations decreased in western portions of Wyoming and Montana from 1966-2013. However, populations have generally increased in eastern portions of Wyoming, Montana, and Alberta. Improved habitat conditions in 2015 will provide more snipe hunting opportunity.

## **RAILS**

Breeding Bird Survey data indicate populations of both Virginia and sora rails increased from 1968-2013. Both species breed in wetland habitats and the increased precipitation should help production. Improved habitat conditions will also provide better rail hunting opportunities.

## **MOURNING DOVES**

Based on the Breeding Bird Survey, mourning dove populations increased slightly in Wyoming over the past 10 years. Production in 2014 was generally below average, and appears to be below average again in 2015. Increased surface water availability and seed production may improve hunting; however weather is the primary factor that influences hunting opportunity in Wyoming. The majority of doves migrate out of the state with the first cold snap, which usually occurs between late-August and mid-September.

## **SANDHILL CRANES**

Cranes that migrate through eastern Wyoming (Crane Hunt Area 7) are primarily from the Mid-Continent Population (MCP). The MCP has been relatively stable since the early 1980s and exceeds the established objective range of 349,000–472,000. The breeding distribution extends from northwestern Minnesota and western Quebec, northwesterly through arctic Canada and Alaska. During fall most MCP cranes follow migration routes lying east of Wyoming. Smaller numbers pass through SE Wyoming during a brief window typically in early October. Consequently, they are hunted on an opportunistic basis and although permits are unlimited, only a small number is harvested each year.

Cranes that breed and stage in central and western Wyoming (Hunt Areas 1-6) are from the Rocky Mountain Population (RMP). During the fall 2014 survey, 19,668 RMP cranes were counted, roughly the same as in 2013 and well within the established population objective of 17,000-21,000. The harvest allocation is based on a 3-year average of the fall population index. The average increased slightly after the 2014 count, allowing an additional 55 permits to be issued in Wyoming. Cranes in hunt areas 4 and 6 roost and feed in the same general locations every year. Roost locations in Hunt Area 6 are north of Worland, the Otto area, Powell to Ralston, and Ralston Reservoir. Roost locations in Hunt Area 4 are Hidden Valley, Riverview Valley, and the south side of Ocean Lake. For best success, scout prior to the season and secure landowner permission to access the fields cranes are using.